



**Watson
Children's
Shelter**

A Safe Haven for Children in Crisis

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EXHIBIT 3 17
DATE 2/4/2011
HB

February 4, 2011

Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
2011 Montana Legislature

Re: Testimony in support of DPHHS Child and Family Services Division Budget

Dear Chairman Roberts, Vice Chairman Lewis and Members of the
Health and Human Services Sub-Committee:

My sincere thanks to each of you for your commitment to the safety and care of
Montana children.

When the police took into custody the two parents who, for several years, had sexually molested their 5 children, ages 3 to 11, the social worker from Child and Family Services breathed a sigh of relief when Watson Children's Shelter in Missoula said "Yes, we can care for all of the children. Bring them over." Not just a warm bed and a nourishing meal, but each child welcomed into a beautiful home by nurturing staff with in depth training related to children from traumatic experiences. Not a place to wait until the court decides their fate -- each child was provided immediate care from a pediatrician, their first visit to the dentist, therapy, eye exams and a multitude of other special needs services. Not just one new outfit for each child, but 5 new outfits, 2 pairs of shoes, 7 pairs of socks and underwear, 2 pairs of pajamas and a warm winter coat and boots. Not just games and television, but their first Grizzly football game, swimming lessons, birthday parties, the chance to have friends, to feel safe and not be ashamed anymore. All of this was provided by Watson Children's Shelter, which for 35 years has cared for thousands of children, infant to age 14, who are victims of abuse, neglect, abandonment or family crisis, across western Montana.

I urge you to ask yourself as you contemplate this budget, is it reasonable what you are asking of Providers and Child and Family Services? What is the price of the life of a child? The safety of a child? The chance for a child to be a child? Do you have children, do you have grandchildren and would you cut back to just necessities? A bed, a meal and a roof over their head?

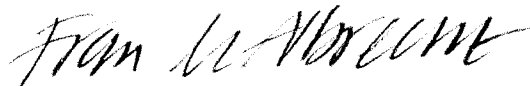
Please remember that these children deserve a chance to have a future. As you look at dollar figures, remember that these children will cost us much, much more in the future if you do not give them the chance at a having a childhood now. By cutting back on provider rates and implementing vacancy savings, you are taking away a child's hope for a chance at life and access to the care they so desperately

require. How much are you willing to cut while a child is left in a horribly physically or sexually abusive situation? How much are you willing to cut before a child dies?

The existing Governor's budget includes a Child and Family Services Vacancy Savings of 7%, dictating that approximately 50 positions within Child and Family Service must remain unfilled. This means less social workers to investigate referrals of child abuse and neglect, fewer visits to children in foster care, less time to develop permanency plans for children in out-of home care, and an overall squeeze on the limited human resources within Child and Family Services staff. This "squeeze" ultimately undermines existing staff and leads to eventual turn over, costing the state more dollars. There are federal financial sanctions as well, costing the state additional funds. Most importantly, this understaffing greatly undermines the ability of Child and Family Services to ensure care and permanency for children in custody and to protect the precious children in our communities who are suffering from physical or sexual abuse, or severe neglect.

I urge you to take action on maintaining or increasing the Child and Family Services executive budget as presented by the Governor. I urge you to protect and increase provider rates. I urge you to remember that there is a child's life behind every decision you make. The children depend upon your voice.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fran M. Albrecht", written in a cursive style.

Fran Maronick Albrecht, M.Ed.
Executive Director